Maharlika

PINOY LIFE IN THE MARIANAS

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FMI Volunteers

What wears a colorful shirt, carries a garbage bag, and keeps Saipan clean? The answer is any of the Beautify CNMI! volunteers.

Page 3

Reflections

As we all turn pensive and look inward this Holy Week, I thought of reflecting on Jesus' utmost act of humility when he washed the feet of His disciples.

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JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

HANGIN' IN THERE
A man climbs on the wooden cross to loosen the ropes tied to it after it was erected on the peak of Mt. Tapotchao on Good Friday morning.

SWS: Voters going for GO bets

MANILA (Inquirer)—The ruling coalition is far from dominating the congressional, gubernatorial and mayoral races in the May 14 elections, according to findings of a survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations.

In a statement, SWS said "the plurality [of registered voters] would vote for opposition candidates, and only the minority would vote for administration candidates for representative, governor and mayor."

The survey, conducted nationwide from Feb. 24 to Feb. 27 also found that those who preferred administration candidates would not vote straight for candidates of the Team Unity (TU).

SWS Page 2

'Long-term alien workers should be considered'

By FERDIE DE LA TORRE
REPORTER

Long-term alien workers in the CNMI should be looked into in considering the imposition of immigration federalization in the Commonwealth.

In his recent dialogue with members of the Filipino community on Saipan, U.S. deputy assistant secretary for insular affairs David Cohen stated that they are aware of the situation of long-time foreign employees like Filipinos.

Cohen said he personally drafted his testimony that he delivered before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources last February.

He said in his testimony he called the attention of the committee chair-

LONG-TERM Page 2

Pinoy foods at Mt. Tapochau trek

Take your pick: lugaw or congee, boiled egg, kutsinta and puto.

These were just some of the food items offered by Filipino groups to trekkers during yesterday's Good Friday walk to Mt. Tapochau.

"There's plenty of people. We cooked lugaw seven times! By 8am, nothing was left. It was fun," said Ed Reyes, co-chair of the United Filipino Organization.

He said that UFO, MDX, and other Filipino groups such as CNMI Power, Bicol Association, Friends of the Mariana Islands, among oth-

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PINOYNEWS

Info Caravan to visit As Perdido

The Philippine Consulate General's ongoing information campaign, Info Caravan Project, will reach the As Perdido village this Sunday.

Overseas Workers Welfare Administration welfare officer Leonor Mabagal told Saipan Tribune yesterday that the 5th Info Caravan campaign would be held at the Cornerstone Christian Church along Chalan Piao in As Perdido, tomorrow from 2pm to 5pm.

The Philippine Consulate General is inviting Filipino workers residing around the village to attend the Info Caravan.

The caravan is intended to disseminate information about the services of the Philippine Consulate General in the CNMI and its sub-offices such as the Philippine Overseas Labor Office and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration. The campaign is part of extra efforts to increase awareness among overseas Filipino workers in the CNMI about their rights and privileges.

It also aims to provide information on how OFWs can maintain their OWWA membership status to receive benefits to their advantage.

As Perdido will be the firth village that the Consulate will be visiting since the office started the project January this year.

The campaign this Sunday will be in collaboration with the OWWA-OFW Support Group. Consulate officials will lead the Information Caravan. The caravan will visit some other villages around the CNMI in the near future and talk to Filipino workers and some of their employers for consultation. ***(Marconi Calindas)***

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

TAPOTCHAO VIGIL
Hundreds of Catholic devotees listen to the reenactment of Christ's seven last words upon the arrival of the wooden cross at the peak of Mt. Tapochao yesterday morning.

LONG-TERM
FROM PAGE 1

man Jeff Bingaman about the "unique situation of the long-term foreign employees that have become an integral part of CNMI society."

In sharing his testimony with the Filipino community, Cohen said: "A number of foreign employees who have been working in the CNMI for five, 10, 15 or more years. Many are raising children in the CNMI and the children are U.S. citizens."

He said these workers were invited to come to the CNMI because they were needed. "They came and stayed legally and they contributed much to the community. They were essential in building the CNMI economy from the ground up from what it was," he pointed out.

"Long-term foreign employees are integrated into all levels of the CNMI workforce and society serving as doctors, nurses, journalists, business managers, engineers, architects, service industry employees, housekeepers, farmers, construction workers, and countless other occupations," Cohen said.

Cohen stated that he hopes the U.S. Senate and the CNMI government will keep the situation of these long-term members of the CNMI community in mind as it considers reforms to the Commonwealth's immigration system.

After reading his testimony, Cohen assured the Filipino community in that dialogue that the situation of these long-term workers is "definitely in our minds."

Cohen said they are going to draft the bill up until April 30, 2007.

"After we draft the bill, I think the bill will be introduced in the Senate, perhaps sometime this spring. But after that it's anybody's guess what is going to happen. It is impossible to tell," he said.

Cohen cited that the minimum wage bill was one of the very, very top priorities of the new Congress.

"And we see that politics is so complicated that even the minimum wage bill, they haven't finished working on it. It's gotten stuck. So you can never predict what is going to happen," he said.

Cohen said immigration reform in the CNMI does not have the natural momentum of the minimum wage bill so it is very difficult to determine how quickly it is going to move.

In that dialogue, he emphasized that immigration federalization in the CNMI is not a certainty.

Hundreds of Filipino workers filled the Pedro P. Tenorio Multi-Purpose Center in Susupe to attend Cohen's consultation meeting with Filipino community.

Cohen said he appreciates the Filipinos' concern and the anxiety on the federalization issue.

The U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee had asked the Department of Interior to prepare a draft of legislation that would federalize the CNMI immigration system.

PINOY
FROM PAGE 1

ers put up tents on the roadside since Thursday evening for yesterday's annual event.

Each tent had something to offer people who walked from the foot of the mountain on Capital Hill to the peak and back.

"We had different items on the table. Ours was lugaw and boiled eggs. Others brought bread, puto, kutsinta, and the like," said Reyes.

He said these were hot items for most Filipino trekkers. "There were also locals but mostly Filipinos came to our tables. That's because they know the food already," he said.

He said interestingly, Filipino trekkers were mostly young people. "It's a good way to introduce them to Pinoy food," Reyes said.

He said people started climbing between 1am and 2am.

Every year, a large number of Filipinos in the CNMI join the annual Good Friday trek to Mt. Tapochau.

This tradition is highlighted by the carrying of a wooden cross to the peak of Mt. Tapochau and erecting it there.

This dates back to Good Friday in 1977 with the blessing of a giant wooden cross in front of the Mt. Carmel Cathedral in Chalan Kanoa.

The event has become a popular annual trek even for the non-religious, treating it as a fun morning exercise. ***(Liberty Dones)***

SWS
FROM PAGE 1

TU senatorial candidates would get only four to five seats among pro-administration voters, according to the SWS.

The survey found that among those who would vote for opposition candidates for local positions, the Senate race scores were consistently 8-2-2 in favor of the Genuine Opposition (GO) candidates.

The survey used face-to-face interviews with 1,200 randomly chosen adults -- 300 each in Metro Manila, the rest of Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao.

The opinion poll had a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points for national data and plus or minus six percentage points for regional data.

At the national convention of the Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats on Monday, Gabriel Claudio, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's political adviser, said the campaign machinery of the administration would allow it to clinch a 12-0 victory in the Senate race.

Claudio said the "complete dominance" of the administration in the elections was possible because 90 percent of all incumbent officials were with the administration.

Team Unity has fielded candidates for 70 percent of close to 18,000 local positions.

SWS said opposition candidates would get 28 percent to 36 percent of the votes for representative, governor, and mayor.

Thirty-six percent said they would vote for an opposition candidate for representative, 28 percent for administration, and 26 percent for an independent candidate. The balance of 10 percent did not give an answer.

For governor, 28 percent of the respondents said they would vote for an opposition candidate, 25 percent for administration, and 21 percent for an independent candidate.

For mayor, 35 percent would vote for an opposition candidate, 33 percent would vote for administration, and 23 percent for an independent candidate.

Luzon voters for opposition

The SWS said voters in Luzon preferred the opposition, while those in the Visayas and Mindanao tended to support the administration.

For representative, opposition candidates dominated in Metro Manila, with 50 percent of the potential votes. They got 39 percent in the rest of Luzon.

The opposition scored 30 percent in Mindanao and 24 percent in the Visayas, according to the SWS.

Administration candidates for representative were leading in the Visayas, with 41 percent, and in Mindanao, with 34 percent. They got 24 percent in the rest of Luzon, and 13 percent in Metro Manila.

The SWS said independent candidates for representative got 26 percent in both Luzon outside Metro Manila and the Visayas, and 24 percent in both Metro Manila and Mindanao.

For the gubernatorial race, opposition candidates were leading in Luzon outside Metro Manila, with 40 percent of the potential votes. They got 27 percent in the Visayas and 23 percent in Mindanao.

The SWS said administration candidates for governor were leading in the Visayas, with 39 percent, and in Mindanao, with 33 percent. They got 23 percent of the potential votes in Luzon outside Metro Manila.

Independent candidates for governor scored 26 percent in the Visayas, 25 percent in the balance of Luzon, and 22 percent in Mindanao.

For mayor, opposition candidates were leading in Metro Manila, with 46 percent of the potential votes, and in the rest of Luzon, with 39 percent. They got 28 percent in Mindanao and 26 percent in the Visayas.

Administration candidates for mayor, meanwhile, dominated in the Visayas, with 42 percent, and in Mindanao, with 41 percent. They got 28 percent in Luzon outside Metro Manila and 19 percent in Metro Manila.

Independent candidates for mayor get 25 percent of potential votes in Metro Manila, 24 percent in both the Visayas and the rest of Luzon, and 19 percent in Mindanao.

Among those who would vote for administration candidates, the score would be 6 or 7 for GO, 4 or 5 for TU, and 1 for independent, according to the SWS.

Among those who preferred independent local candidates, the score would be 7 or 8 for GO, 3 for TU, and 1 or 2 for independent.

The SWS said the survey items on the voting preferences for representative, governor, and mayor were not commissioned.

LABOR FRONT

Filing FLSA complaints

By FERDIE P. DE LA TORRE
REPORTER

Q: Many alien workers file a lawsuit in federal court alleging violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act. What is FLSA?

A: FLSA establishes minimum wage, overtime pay, record-keeping, and child labor standards affecting full-time and part-time workers in the private sector and in Federal, State, and local governments. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, overtime pay at a rate of not less than one and one-half times their regular rates of pay is required after 40 hours of work in a workweek.

■ ■ ■

Q: Is extra pay required for weekend or night work under FLSA?

A: No. Extra pay for working weekends or nights is a matter of agreement between the employer and the employee. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, FLSA does not require extra pay for weekend or night work. However, FLSA does require that covered, nonexempt workers be paid not less than time and one-half the employee's regular rate for time worked over 40 hours in a workweek.

■ ■ ■

Q: Does FLSA require breaks or meal periods to alien workers?

A: No. CNMI like some states have requirements for breaks or meal periods. U.S. Labor states that if a person works in state which does not require breaks or meal periods, these benefits are a matter of agreement between the employer and the employee (or the employer's representative).

Submit questions on labor issues to *Saipan Tribune* via e-mail at editor@saipantribune.com, or by calling 235-6397, 235-2440, or 235-8747 and leaving a message at Ext. 133 or 135. You may also submit questions in person by writing it down and dropping it off at the *Saipan Tribune*'s office on the second floor of the CIC Centre on Beach Road, Garapan.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Friends of the Mariana Islands, a spin-off of the Filipino organization MOVER, pose after a recent cleanup activity.

Filipino group helps 'beautify CNMI'

What wears a colorful shirt, carries a garbage bag, and keeps Saipan clean? The answer is any of the Beautify CNMI! volunteers who can often be spotted removing litter along the island's roads and at tourist spots.

Established almost a year ago, Beautify CNMI! owes much of its success to the many groups and individuals who participate in the cleanup programs.

One such group is the Friends of the Mariana Islands, a spin-off of the Filipino organization MOVER which previously won recognition for its contributions to local environmental programs. FMI is led by former MOVER president Marites A. Castillo and has about 50 members.

Since being founded in November 2006, FMI has been a partner of Beautify CNMI!.

The members have picked up trash at the Garapan tourist district, Lau Lau Bay, and the lighthouse on Navy Hill, among numerous sites. Yesterday, they were up early at Mt. Tapochao, making sure the Good Friday hikers were well hydrated. After the trekking crowd has thinned out, the volunteers began on the other task they had set out to do—clear the long road up the mountain of litter.

"It is our goal to continue what MOVER did before and that is to serve the community by helping keep Saipan clean," said Castillo, who has lived on the island for 14 years.

She said all Saipan residents of Philippine descent, regardless of citizenship, are welcome to join FMI as long as they have legal immigration status in the CNMI. ***(Agnes E. Donato)***

AP

HOLY WEEK RITUAL
A Filipino devotee prays while touching a statue of Jesus Christ Wednesday, April 4, 2007, during Holy Week observations, in a church in San Fernando City in Pampanga province north of Manila, Philippines.

10 outstanding Expat Pinoy Kids search on

By MARCONI CALINDAS
REPORTER

The Philippine Consulate General in the CNMI, in collaboration with one of the leading commercial banks in the Philippines, Bank of the Philippine Islands, is inviting overseas Filipino workers to nominate their children for the 2007 Expat Pinoy Children.

At least 10 of the most outstanding children of OFWs will be selected through this project.

BPI said it wishes to extend to children of expatriate Pinoys the pride and honor already accorded to their parents, who are working overseas for their families.

"This campaign brings the bank and the public together in doing their share to nurture this important sector of the society: the Expat Pinoys [OFWs] and their families," said BPI.

BPI said this is also another way for the bank to stir in the consciousness of expat Pinoy children the need to give importance to the sacrifices being made by their parents. For the parents, it will be a great achievement seeing their children finish school and receive recognition from prestigious agencies such as BPI.

The project is in collaboration with Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, Department of Education, Culture and Sports, and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration.

Criteria for the nomination is as follows:

■ The nominees should be at least 15 to 21 years old;

■ a son or daughte r of an Expat Pinoy with a current contract abroad;

■ children of a parent/s or immediate family member who is a client of BPI Unibank;

■ included in the top 10-percent of the class, level or batch year, with no failing grade; and

■ be currently enrolled or recently graduate, not more than two years, from a four-year course.

BPI said the nominees should also submit: proof of scholastic standing (certified true copy of grades) and received trophies, medals or any form of recognition from the school; proof of enrolment—registration form or graduation—diploma, certificate, or transcript of records with indication of graduation, from the school, college or university; birth certificate or proof of relation to the Expat Pinoy; form certification from the BPI and BPI Family Savings branch head that any family member of the child has an account with BPI, BPI Family Savings Bank and BPI Direct; and, a letter of nomination from the school principal, district superintendents, college dean, managers of BPI and BPI Family Savings Bank, parish priest or head of civic or church organization.

Ten Expat Pinoy children will be declared as winners: four from Greater Metro Manila Area, two from Luzon, two from Visayas and two from Mindanao. Winners will be notified by mail. Awarding will be in August 2007 in time for the BPI's celebration of its 156th Anniversary

Nomination forms are available at http://www.bpiexpressonline.com or http://www.bpidirect.com.

Deadline for submission of entries is on June 30. All entries must be submitted to the secretariat c/o Merkcom at Unit 711 Manila Bank Building, Ayala Avenue, Makati City.

Philippine travel agents win big with Guam

TUMON, Guam—Several Philippine-based travel agents walked away with high-end prizes at the Hafa Adai Reception held in their honor by the Guam Visitors Bureau on March 6 at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Manila.

With arrivals from the Philippines showing a significant 19-percent increase over last year, the GVB wanted to thank the many travel agents whose hard work is largely responsible for the rising number of Filipino visitors to Guam.

Travel agents from Winlink Travel, Travel Update, Bridges Travel & Tours, and Skynet Travel Corp. each won hotel stays and other prizes for enhancing their visit to Guam. Ms. Michelle Narvaez and Ms. Issa Dimaano from Philippine Airlines also won hotel stays and more, plus unwittingly set the stage for the grand prize, a free trip to Guam compliments of their employer.

The grand prize, a four-day/three-night trip to Guam courtesy of Philippine Airlines, was won by Amor Baldovino and also included accommodations at the Ohana Oceanview Hotel and dinner at Toh Jee restaurant.

In addition to honoring the travel agents, the GVB also recognized Continental and Philippine Airlines for their contributions to Guam's tourism industry. The two airlines are the main carriers providing service to and from Guam and the Philippines.

GVB extends special thanks to Philippine Airlines, Ohana Oceanview Guam, Fiesta Resort Guam, Days Inn, Royal Orchid Hotel, Pacific Islands Club, Avis Rent-A-Car, Hotel Nikko Guam, Hertz Rent-A-Car, Mandara Spa, and Gef Pa'go Chamorro Cultural Village for the many outstanding prizes received by some of the Philippine's most outstanding travel agents. ***(PR)***

Military to help thwart poll violence

By JOEL GUINTO
INQUIRER.NET

The Armed Forces of the Philippines will "jointly undertake measures" with the Philippine National Police (PNP), under the supervision of the Commission on Elections (Comelec), to thwart election related violence, a military spokesman said Thursday.

The involvement of the military in peacekeeping during the election period is provided for by the memorandum of agreement signed in October between the Comelec and the Department of National Defense, Lt. Col. Bartolome Bacarro said in a statement.

"With the noted increase in the number of election related violent incidents the Armed Forces of the Philippines with the Philippine National Police, as lead agency and under the supervision of the Commission on Elections jointly undertakes measures to prevent the occurrence of these incidents," Bacarro said.

"AFP units upon deputization by the Comelec shall make available necessary manpower support to the peacekeeping efforts of the Philippine National Police," he added.

Bacarro warned individuals who would sow violence during the May polls that security forces were prepared to take them "head on."

The MoA between the DND and the Comelec was an offshoot of the election fraud scandal in 2004 that allegedly involved senior military officials.

Under the agreement, the Comelec can call on the military when there is a "serious armed threat."

Soldiers are also prohibited from handling election paraphernalia or having their camps used as precincts.

AP

CALVARY HILL
A group of children run away from a site where crosses stand, Wednesday, April 4, 2007, in San Fernando City in Pampanga province north of Manila, Philippines, where the reenactment of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ will be held. The yearly religious penitence is timed during the observance of the Lenten season and reaches its peak in this predominantly Catholic nation on Good Friday when some devotees have themselves nailed to the cross to imitate the suffering of Jesus Christ.

Malacañang on Ocampo: He'll be back in jail soon

MANILA (Inquirer)—While disappointed at the release of Bayan Muna Rep. Satur Ocampo on Tuesday, Malacañang expressed confidence the party-list lawmaker would soon be back in jail because 14 other murder cases had been filed against him.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said the Supreme Court released Ocampo on bail after government lawyers filed only one information for all the 15 counts of murder lodged against him for his alleged involvement in the killing of suspected military spies in Leyte in 1985.

Ocampo denied any involvement in the killings, saying he was in military detention at the time. He was arrested in 1976 and was detained for nine years.

The high court said Tuesday that Ocampo should be released while it was deliberating on his petition seeking the recall of his arrest warrant and questioning the multiple murder charges filed against him.

Ermita said Solicitor General Agnes Devanadera had informed him that the government lawyers had tried to remedy the defect by filing 14 individual cases against Ocampo on Monday, or two days after the oral arguments in the Supreme Court.

Ermita expressed the hope that Judge Ephrem Abando of the Regional Trial Court of Hilongos, Leyte, would soon issue a warrant of arrest against Ocampo.

"There's a very high probability (he will soon be back in jail)," Ermita said at his weekly press briefing.

"So much will depend on the appreciation by Judge Abando of Leyte. I don't want to preempt him but what I can say is that a murder is a murder is a murder whether it's one, 10 or 15. So if the only defect is that one information was filed for the 15 cases, they corrected it. They filed 14 information (charges)," he said.

'ASEAN aims to follow EU example'

MANILA (Inquirer)—What eventually became the European Union was the first dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and this year being the 30th anniversary of the partnership, the relationship invites the question: Can ASEAN follow in EU's footsteps?

This was the main point pondered by a Filipino-led ASEAN delegation that met last month with various EU institutions headquartered in Belgium, as well as in Germany, the latter being the current holder of the EU presidency.

The tour served as an opportunity for the high-level panel to gather "insights, inspiration and perspectives" from the EU that could be applied to ASEAN's own pursuit of regional integration, according to former Philippine Ambassador Rosario Manalo.

For Manalo, chair of the task force drafting the ASEAN Charter, the willingness of each ASEAN member-state to "surrender a certain degree of sovereignty" is the key, if not the hardest step, to becoming a cohesive bloc approximating that which binds 27 European countries today.

This means the 10 ASEAN countries may have to yield to a "supranational body" which, by agreement among the members, would set a common regional policy on matters ranging from economic activity, migration, labor to energy, transportation, etc.

He topped the bar but didn't know it

By VINCENT CABREZA, FRANK CIMATU
NORTHERN LUZON BUREAU

BAGUIO CITY—Noel Neil Malimban was at an Internet café with his girlfriend browsing through the list of bar passers on the Supreme Court website when they learned that they had both passed the examinations.

Ronda Doctor, Malimban's girlfriend and classmate, said they did not find out until later from calls and text messages that Malimban had finished on top of the 1,893 successful examinees.

"We were so busy [searching the Web] we turned off our cell phones. We learned about [it] when we turned on our phones, but we were already headed for home," she said.

Malimban refused to believe the news for a long time, Doctor said.

The quiet, somewhat introspective accountant said he found the attention overwhelming.

"The Lord is good. I don't deserve this but God's grace gave me the strength to take the exam and the courage to wait for the results," he said.

Malimban, a graduate of the University of the Cordilleras law school here, was a student of lawyer Janet Abuel, who topped the bar in 1998, the first UC law graduate to do so. Abuel teaches law at UC.

Doctor said they found Abuel's class fascinating because of her inspiring success story, so that the news that Malimban had equaled her feat was like a joke.

UC was still known as the Baguio Colleges Foundation in 1998 when Abuel topped the bar. As no one had ever expected Abuel to break the dominance of the elite law schools in Manila, there were no marching bands to welcome her when the exam results were announced in early 1999.

Abuel's classmates celebrated her feat by wearing shirts with messages like, "We're a little known school but we're Number 1" and "University of What?"

But on Wednesday morning, Malimban was greeted with gongs and by Cordillera dancers clad in G-strings and tapis (native woven skirt) when he was feted at a luncheon which was followed by a press conference.

"We no longer have the feelings of inferiority from being a law school outside Metro Manila," said Jesus Benjamin Salvosa, the UC chair.

Lawyer Glenn Agranzamendez, another UC alumnus, said 45 UC students passed the bar exams of 2006, more than the 36 bar passers the previous year.

Salvosa gave Malimban an envelope filled with cash and a barong Tagalog, which Malimban said he would wear when he takes his oath later this month.

Abuel stayed out of Malimban's press conference, leaving the limelight to her 31-year-old former student.

It was the 29-year-old Doctor who answered most of the questions although she evaded those that delved into their eight-year relationship by making jokes or offering up trivia about Malimban.

The couple are neighbors in a community inside the Baguio slaughterhouse compound.

According to Doctor, who comes from Tabuk town in Kalinga province, Malimban was raised by his mother and an aunt.

He was born here on Aug. 19, 1975, the youngest of three children. His father, Vicente, is a barangay (village) council member in Dasmariñas town, Cavite province. His mother, Lourdes, is a housewife who lives in Baguio.

Malimban grew up being tutored by his aunt Adelaida Coloma, who described her nephew as patient and obsessive. It was Coloma who brought him to school and helped him with all his assignments.

"[He] is our walking dictionary at home," Coloma said in an interview.

Malimban had his early schooling at the Baguio Patriotic School and at the Saint Louis University Laboratory School. He finished his secondary education at the SLU Boy's High School.

It was also at SLU that he took his accounting degree. He placed 14th in the accountancy board exams of 2000.

He worked briefly for a Metro Manila-based accounting firm before returning here to study law.

Malimban said he continues to be barraged by questions about a "secret formula" for topping the bar.

Media watchdog seeks release of Filipino radio commentator

MANILA, Philippines (AP) _ An international media watchdog is seeking the release of a former radio commentator jailed for libel in the Philippines, saying such punishment is inappropriate and could cause widespread self-censorship.

"We are gravely concerned about the jail sentence handed down to radio commentator Alex Adonis," Joel Simon, executive director of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, said in a statement posted on the group's Web site Thursday.

"Jail terms are never appropriate recourse for libel convictions and could lead to self-censorship across all media outlets," Simon said.

Adonis, a former anchorman in southern Davao city for DXMF Bombo Radyo, was arrested in February and has been serving a four-and-a-half-year term over a 2001 libel case filed by a Davao lawmaker.

The libel case stemmed from Adonis' critical comments on the legislator's personal life.

12 stars recall humbling experiences

By DOLLY ANNE CARVAJAL
INQUIRER

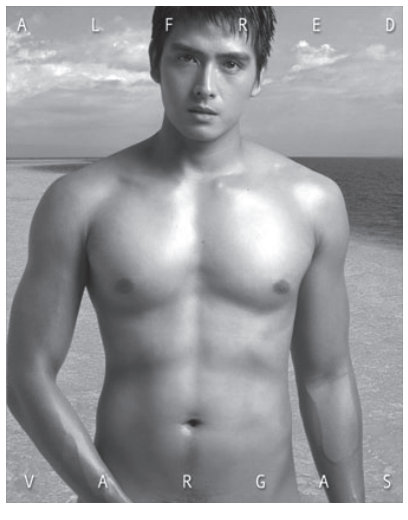
MANILA—As we all turn pensive and look inward this Holy Week, I thought of reflecting on Jesus' utmost act of humility when he washed the feet of His disciples.

And then He told them: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you."—John 13:14-15. We all must be aware of whose toes we step on because we may have to kiss their feet someday.

In show biz, oversized egos abound. Stars can easily lose themselves in the system if they let the trappings of success trap them. Their fat paychecks sometimes make them forget to do a reality check once in a while. So I asked some celebs about their most humbling experiences. It's good to know that, even if they're already way up there, some of them still haven't lost sight of what's really worthwhile.

OGIE ALCASID: I am humbled every time I see how dedicated our young musicians are—especially the very talented bands—toward perfecting their craft.

MIRIAM QUIAMBAO: When I realized that the celebrity image is not all of who I am, when all that was taken away, I was left with just me. I had to look really deep inside and figure out who the real Miriam is. Having a failed relationship is a humbling experience that has taught me to be more discerning with my choices. Having gone through a state of depression has helped me be more grounded in my faith. I realized that without God, I am nothing. With Him, I can be and do anything. The realization is deeply humbling and one that I strive to remember each day even as I'm back in the limelight.



MARVIN AGUSTIN: When I was in high school, I had to collect bottles so I could have it exchanged for money for my fare going home. Then I wash my uniform right away so it's clean the next day. We used to sell everything in our neighborhood so that we could have food on our table the next day. I would go to Tutuban to buy shirts to sell to my friends. Memories of those struggling days keep me grounded now that I'm in show biz.

CHRISTIAN BAUTISTA: Being so busy, I usually just go in and out of our Cavite home. I arrive late at night and leave early in the morning. One month, it happened almost everyday. My mom very calmly said, "I hope you still remember that this is a home and not just a house." That really humbled me! After that, I fixed my schedule so that I could spend more time with my family."

MEDWIN MARFIL (True Faith): I was on a boat trip from Cebu. I went to the upper deck and laid down on one of the benches. I stared at the night sky. Suddenly, I saw thousands of shooting stars—I realized it was a meteor shower—and it filled me with so much awe. I understood that I am but a small part of this huge universe. Infinitesimal I was, but still significant somehow.

ALFRED VARGAS: Every day in show biz is a humbling experience. You always encounter someone more talented, better-looking and more fresh. There's always someone better than you out there. Nevertheless, it is the people who love you that make the difference and, of course, God. They make you strong and remind you to be humble and grateful for all the blessings.

MARIEL RODRIGUEZ: In "OK Fine 'Tong Gusto Nyo," Tita Gloria Romero and I shared a dressing room. With her age and status in the industry, I was so humbled to see that she didn't have a PA or a yaya. She did everything on her own and never made utos. What an icon indeed!"

MAUREEN LARRAZABAL: "When I went blind for a few months, I learned who my true friends were. Everything is superficial. All we have is just borrowed so we have to be thankful. We take our sense of sight for granted until such time that we don't have it anymore. That experience was really an eye-opener for me!"

WENDELL RAMOS: When my mom and I had a misunderstanding, I learned to swallow my pride to renew my relationship with her. Children should be the ones to reach out to their parents instead of the other way around, especially pag matanda na our folks kasi if sila pa maga-adjust sa atin, they may break.

TIN-TIN BERSOLA: When I was in my teens, our family biz didn't do so well, so we almost lost everything—our investments, properties, all that we ever owned. From being well-off, we struggled. That's when I looked for meaning in life. That's when I found meaning in missionary work. I spent weekends with a family in the slums. It was an awakening experience. There I was in a tiny home which barely fit a family, with no decent toilet. I shared with them simple meals. It was such a humbling experience 'cause here I was suffering at a time when I lost all the material comforts in my teen life and moving houses too often yet here was a family living in such dismal conditions. It made me realize that material wealth is not important to make you happy.

JOEY GENEROSO (Side A): Through the years, I've been humbling myself before persons who try to provoke me and test my patience by doing wrong in any aspect that may destroy me. I try to control my temper and pray that soon that person will realize his mistakes and will have peace of mind.

CHARLENE GONZALES: Everyday when I wake up, I am humbled by the greatness and power of God. Despite our humane shortcomings, God still gives us the following day to redeem ourselves. And no matter what, God will still embrace us with unconditional love.

Alex on row with Rhian

I've always liked Alessandra de Rossi's style. She says what she means and means what she says. No trite show biz answers from this feisty girl.

She's more sad than hurt about what happened between her and Rhian Ramos during a taping for "L.U.V. Pow." Alex mispronounced Rhian's name (Umi) in the "sleepwalk" scene. Rhian snapped: "Can't you be professional? I'm working my ass off here."

Instead of retaliating, Alex let out her dismay by throwing her cell phone. "First time may nagtaray sa akin ng ganun," she laments. "Di naman maiwasan mag-buckle minsan. Maybe she was just having a bad day. We are not close but I thought okay na kami. Nung first taping day namin she even kidded me na crush daw niya ako."

Rhian's handler has invited Alex to lunch so she and Rhian can straighten things out. "I said no need. Mag-sorry na lang siya sa staff ng show kasi natense lahat sa incident," Alex says. "I just hope people won't think na ako ang bad. Maingay lang ako but I'm not confrontational."

Alex has been in the biz for nine years. Rhian is just a newbie. What gives Rhian the right to throw her weight around? Doesn't she fumble her lines sometimes? Maybe she believes too much in her own hype.

Warning signal

Keanna Reeves was spotted in Embassy with Toffee Calma. Her French BF was missing in action. When asked about Joseph Bitangcol, whom she got chummy with during their shooting of "Shake Rattle & Roll 8," she naughtily replied, "Kung wala lang akong BF, talagang papatulan ko siya."

Sandara Park, better beware!

Web site trivia

My kids got me hooked on multiply.com. I'm now in the process of adding my celebrity friends to my site. It's interesting to see what their home page headings are. It gives you a glimpse of who they are away from the klieg lights. Pauleen Luna's goes, "Pauleen's not perfect and so are you." Glaiza de Castro's says, "Against Perfection" and Jed Madela's welcome line is, "You Judge." More celeb home page trivia next issue.

Go surf and "multiply!"

Angel's look-alike

Glaiza de Castro could pass for Angel Locsin's look-alike, and so she was thrilled to be working on "Asian Treasures." Glaiza gushes, "I'm learning about professionalism and love for fans from Ate Angel." What about love brewing between her and co-star Marky Cielo? Glaiza giggles. "Para lang kaming mga bata na naglalaro and nagkukulitan sa set. Love is the farthest thing from our minds."

This girl will go far because, this early, she already knows what to prioritize.

New endorser

It was like a trip down memory lane for Dawn Zulueta when she shot the dreamy PH Care ad in Batanes. "I felt nostalgic because that's where Goma and I shot 'Hihintayin Kita sa Langit'." She admits missing those days but she's happier now with her hubby Anton Lagdameo. As she says in her ad, they have put extra care in their marriage, so they've lasted nine years (and counting!).

"He made me realize that there's a world outside show biz. Intrigues no longer bother me as much as they used to. I have a life beyond show biz."

This "PH woman" ought to be given a PhD in balancing marriage and career.

Cooking up a global image for Pinoy cuisine

By the Staff
INQUIRER

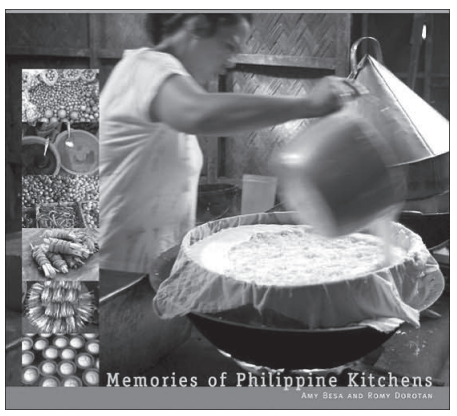
MANILA—Familiarity with Asian food may have become almost a status symbol for sophisticated Westerners but, sadly, Filipino dishes are often not covered by their expertise. Outside the Philippines, Pinoy restaurants still cater primarily to kababayans. But couple Amy Besa and Romy Dorotan have done a remarkable job introducing New Yorkers to the flavors of the homeland through their New York restaurant Cendrillon and now through their new book "Memories of Philippine Kitchens." Out since November in the United States, the book has been picked by Barnes & Noble as book of the month.

Besa found time during her book tour to talk to us about how they went a step further in familiarizing non-Filipinos with Filipino cuisine by offering charming stories about the history, the tradition and the culture behind the dishes, as well as recipes that an American can cook—or any non-Filipino, for that matter -in an American kitchen should be able to replicate.

How long did the book project take?

About 3 years. Since 2002 pinag-uusapan na yan... We have a friend, Kristina Tabora, who, at one point, worked as a consultant for the Department of Tourism. She was complaining that she wanted to promote Filipino food, but she didn't have a really good cookbook to show to clients and people abroad. She said, "You have to write a cookbook." And I said, sure. (Laughs) ...find me a publisher because that's really hard. I never thought she would pull it off.

Within a few months she brought along an editor from Stewart, Tabori and Chang. (Laughs) She had a friend who worked as a designer for [the firm] and was very good friends with this editor, who became my editor. The three of them came to the restaurant one night to taste the food and to get to know us. Romy and I were deciding on the menu. I said let's give her sinigang. You know, adobo is a winner but if I can win over somebody with sinigang, then that's a sure winner, right?



The sinigang Romy made at that time was probably the best sinigang I'd ever tasted in my life... when I tasted it, I was like, Oh my God! Tamang tama yung heat. It had an undertone of heat and the right balance of sourness, and very good fish stock. And it had that fried fillet on top. It's in the book.

What kind of fish did you use?

Wild striped bass. It was a beautiful fillet. Romy likes putting crusts on his fish. And he chopped some rhubarb—kasi rhubarb is maasim (sour)—leeks and he puts a little bit of mustard to coat it, and he sprinkles some semolina. Then he puts the rhubarb and the leeks, pan-fries it and the crust becomes a little bit crunchy. Then he puts it on top of that wonderful broth.

So he put the sinigang down and then the editor, Marissa, said, 'I'm sorry but I don't eat fish.' (Laughter) Toing! (Laughs) Strike one. So I said to her, 'Okay, why don't you just try the broth, because that broth is a very Filipino broth. It's a sour broth, and we'll figure out something else for the next course.' I turned to Romy trying to, like, pow-wow quickly [but] when I looked again the bowl was empty. (Laughter)

Even the fish was gone?

Everything! The bowl was empty. And she said, 'That was the most delicious thing I've eaten in my life.' (Laughs) But she said, 'That's the only fish I will eat.' So they liked us, they liked the restaurant, they liked the food. The next step was meeting the president of the publishing firm...

One thing about Stewart, Tabori and Chang, they treated this book and us with great dignity and respect. They truly admired the culture and they did not spare any costs. As you can see, that book is very expensive to produce. I mean, every publishing professional who has seen that book has commented that it's beautifully done.

There are recipes in the book, right? Are those dishes being served in Cendrillon?

Yes, but not all of them. Some are not that easy to do every day, so what we do is we serve them on special occasions... All the recipes selected are doable in the United States.

Anywhere?

Yes. That was one of the criteria. All of those (recipes) were kitchen-tested by a professional. Some recipes we thought only a Filipino would understand, you know, like the rellenos and the Brazo de Mercedes and the sans rival and things like that, some she really couldn't do. Romy did them in the kitchen and she just documented them and wrote the recipes. Some we redid in our kitchen just to make sure. It was difficult, that last part, because my husband is not a recipe lover. He's an instinctive cook. Every time he tries to follow a recipe it comes out different.

You said you excluded some dishes because they had to be kitchen-tested. Were there popular dishes you didn't include?

We had to remove recipes, for example, like the tibok-tibok because you need carabao's milk. We were taught by Claude Tayag how to make kesong puti, [but] you can't do that. We had recipes for how to cook banana stalk. You can't get it. And then, you know, all these seaweed salads and all these—like the kinagang where you need the hagikhik leaves. Or the batuan. You know for the Visayan sinigang, you use batuan, and you can't get that there.

What vinegar do you use?

We use rice vinegar a lot in the restaurant because it's naturally brewed vinegar. As much as possible, we do not like to use acetic acid, which is what commercial vinegar is.

What's keeping Filipino cuisine from becoming big?

Actually, to tell you the truth, I think Philippine food will be big. It's there. More and more restaurants are opening up. And very trendy, you know.

Why only now?

Well, I think there are enough Filipinos there to make a dent. There are so many Filipinos, and now there are more Filipino chefs... And they are actually working in all kinds of restaurants. They're in hotels, they're in three-, four-star restaurants.

Vietnamese and Thai [food] are readily accessible to Americans. When it comes to Filipino restaurants, they have to scour an entire city to find one, if they're lucky.

Yeah. Well, I think, also one reason as you said, the history of Filipino restaurants in the US is that, traditionally, it's the turo-turo (cooked food) that's there. That's the one that serves the Filipino community.

And usually in small communities, immigrant communities, the people opening restaurants really are not professionals... But I think there are more and more Filipinos who are professionally trained and have a sense of the restaurant as a business, and part of the mainstream business.

I think Filipino food, once you serve it very well, really wins over everyone. I think Filipino food is more interesting than all the other cuisine. I will eat that anytime rather than French food, you know. Somebody asks, 'Do you want to eat French food or Italian food?' (shakes head) I'd rather eat Asian food... You know, it's my culture. It's rice, I want rice. And I really like the philosophy and sensibilities of Asians. More like nurturing and family and community.

What have been the reactions of Americans you've won over in your restaurant?

We have a following already. After all we're like 11 years now, right? We were reviewed twice by the New York Times. The critics really liked us. And in August 2005, we were re-reviewed by the New York Times and he gave us two stars. He fell in love with the Oxtail Kare-kare and the bagoong. It's so funny, you should see all these white people going, 'I love the bagoong!' (laughter)

Several years ago they couldn't stand bagoong!

But, you know, it's the New York Times reviewer, so they loved it, too! (Laughter)

The power of a newspaper review, hah!

Exactly, exactly. It's amazing... (Laughter)

Do you make your own bagoong?

No, no! That's really difficult to make. We buy it from a food distributor. We buy a lot of ingredients from Fil-Am (distributors).

So Filipino bagoong yan talaga?

Yeah, Filipino talaga... But you know, everyone who has eaten the food has loved it. When we first started, there were a lot of people who would say, 'Oh, this is Filipino food, it's greasy.' They would make faces.

This happened when we first opened. People would walk in, sit down and look at the menu, stand up and leave. And say, 'Oh, I'm sorry. I thought this was a Thai restaurant.' I said, Okay, you'll regret it.' (Laughter)

But it's very good to see the reactions of people who walk in and try it. I don't know if you saw it. There was a food writer for the Wall Street Journal who's Indian... I put some excerpts of what he wrote about three years ago.

Did he pay for his dinner?

Oh, yeah. They pay, they paid!

Do they come incognito?

Well, you know, the Wall Street Journal, nobody really knows the guy (laughs), but the New York Times.

Did you recognize them from their pictures in their columns?

No, they're not supposed to put their picture. But sometimes they're, like, five and they're kind of weird. They order everything on the menu. (Laughter) So we knew when Frank Rooney came.

How was the review?

I think he had the adobo. And the article was like saying, why is this food not mainstream? Why don't we have a Filipino restaurant on every corner of the city? It was just that effusive. And I didn't know him. He didn't know us.

So how did that feel?

It felt good except that nobody reads the Wall Street Journal on Saturdays. (Laughter)

Do you serve mangoes?

Yeah. I don't think we can get Philippine mangoes in the US. We suspect they're Thai... because they're very similar to ours.

You know, there was somebody who wrote in Vogue or something, one very wonderful. This is the New York Times, Sunday. This woman was traveling and said when she ate Philippine mangoes, it was a life-changing experience for her. (Laughter) And she was like, we'll never be able to eat mangoes again!

You know, my mother is from Zambales, so we know what good mangoes are.

What is the best Philippine fruit in your memory?

Well, to me, the best thing that nature gave us is coconut. You know, it is the healthiest fruit in the world, and you use every part of the tree and the fruit, in different stages. You can do so many things with it... I love the coconut. You know, like the macapuno. I don't think any other culture has that.

Amy Besa and Romy Dorotan have done a remarkable job introducing New Yorkers to the flavors of the homeland through their New York restaurant Cendrillon and now through their new book "Memories of Philippine Kitchens."

You know, there are so many things we have, like the kalamansi, well, they claim they have it in Indonesia but I don't know if that's the same. The pili, the ube, the macapuno.

Do you cook it the old-fashioned way?

No. You know what? That's my dream. If I ever get the opportunity to do another restaurant—some people are talking to us—I would like to make it a bibingka house. Like really build a bibingka oven. But you have to build from scratch. And you have to have a lot of money.

And space.

Yeah. And you've got to be in a city not like New York because that smoke will be a violation and your neighbors will complain.

Do you have to cook it outside?

Well, you know, you've got to be in a place that's not so dense. New York is full of buildings, tall buildings, and when you put an exhaust like that, you have to put the exhaust in the tallest building beside you. So that's a very expensive prospect. But if you go somewhere with more open space, somewhere in the West Coast. It's possible. That's my dream.

OPINYON

Salvation

There's The Rub
By CONRADO DE QUIROS
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Sonia Roco has a story for these holiest of days. She was one of the survivors of the killer earthquake that struck Baguio in July 1990. She was at the Nevada Hotel attending an NGO conference sponsored by USAID. She tells her ordeal thus:

"We were having merienda. I wanted some tea and started off to the end of the long table where it was. Suddenly things began to rock violently. I was a little shaken, but told myself this was normal. This was Baguio. My first instinct was to retrieve my bag which I had left in my chair. Then the chandelier fell. I felt myself hurled down by a terrible force. While hurtling to the floor, I caught sight of something. It just took a second or two, but everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I saw two legs jutting out from what seemed like solid rock. It was almost comical because the legs were flapping.

"It was the last thing I saw that day. The next instant, it was dark. Completely, absolutely, utterly dark.

"Then shouting, shrill screams. Things were thudding around us. I could see nothing, not even fuzzy outlines. I closed my eyes and opened them. Same thing. I began touching things furiously, like a blind person.

"I made a mental picture of the room. The table had fallen on its side, its legs sticking out. I was lying inside it. There was a guy behind my head. His breath came in spasms, and then he groaned. I felt his slippers push into my head and then his feet went limp. He stopped moving.

"I was lying on my back. I stretched my legs upward to see how far they would go. I touched solid matter with them still bent.

"I began shouting, 'Peach! Peach!' (Peachie Roco, married to Raul's brother Cho.) I heard a voice shouting back not far from me, 'Son! Son!' People were screaming and groaning, some in pain, most in fear.

"I asked Peachie if she was OK. She said she was hunched over a table and her feet were wedged into something. She couldn't move. I had no idea how that looked. But I knew she was in pain.

"Then it struck me: I'm going to die.

"The tremors did not stop. They kept coming from all sides, up and down, side to side. You could feel every ripple and half-expected everything to just fall down. Each time it happened, I clung to the legs of the table.

"I began praying: 'Lord, my life is in your hands. You created me, You can take me back any time you want to.'

"The next moment, I became very practical. I started an inventory of things still just by touch. Paper, vase, an electric fan that had toppled over. I said to the girl beside me, 'Mia, let's pee into this vase, maybe the rescue will take time. We might end up peeing all over the place. She said yes.

"We all knew the time because someone had a penlight and would flash it on his watch now and then and call out the time. At about 4 o'clock in the morning, I heard Peachie groaning. She whispered, 'Son, I can't take it anymore. My legs are numb. I'm so tired.' Those were her last words.

"The hours crawled by. Slowly, I resigned myself to my fate. I began muttering: 'Mother Nature, this is our fault, we have abused you for so long. (I had been to Baguio many times and seen the mines there.) You have a right to be angry. For years, we stabbed you in the womb. Now, we know what it feels to be inside it, to see the damage we have done.' I didn't know if it made any sense. I didn't care.

"Intermittently, things would shake violently and then stop. It had been a day and half since the earthquake struck and I hadn't slept all that time. I was getting thirsty and hungry. The muscles on my face were twitching and my lips were dry. It was getting very hard to swallow. And the room now stank of urine and feces.

"I felt very, very tired. I surrendered myself to my Creator. I didn't know if it was just fatigue, but I began to feel peace. I felt myself floating. I didn't know whether I was asleep or awake. It was in that state that I heard the clicking sounds.

"It started faintly. I thought I was imagining it. Or dreaming it. But it got louder and became clearer. It was the sound of metal hitting concrete. It was coming from below us. They had gotten to us! They were hammering underneath us!

"We realized it almost at the same time. We chorused, 'We're here! We're alive! We're alive!'

"Unbelievably, the first hole they bore was nearest me, at my foot. As soon as the hole was big enough, someone shouted, 'Who's there? Who can hear us?' I shouted back, 'Sonia! Sonia Roco!'

"I had no idea how I looked. They would tell me later that I looked like I had just come from a war. The stench behind me, where I had come from, was overpowering. They were all wearing masks over their mouths, but I noticed that only at back of my mind. I was sobbing and sniffing and trembling.

"I heard Raul's voice before I saw him. I turned on him resentfully and said, 'Why just now? Why did you take so long?'

"Raul said apologetically, 'May kahirapan (It was a little hard).' It was the understatement of his life.

"'Salvation' is a word you hear all the time. I heard it a lot when I was studying catechism. And I said it a lot when I was teaching catechism. But like the words of a prayer, I had never really stopped to wonder what it meant.

"Looking back, I never knew the people who came to pluck me out of the darkness. None of them had to do it. Most of them had families, too. But they took the risk—the structure was fragile. It could have collapsed and buried them along with us. Probably more lethally because they were under us. But they did what they did, and because of that, I am still alive.

"It's enough to restore your faith in God and people. It's enough to give you a deep sense of mission in life. It's enough to make you see the beauty and wonder of life.

"That is salvation."

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Qualified to represent OFWs

We agree with the observation that the party-list system is an impressive innovation introduced by the framers of the post-Marcos Constitution.

However, its "educated guess" as to which party-list groups Comelec Commissioner Resurreccion Borra were referring to when he said "some nominees (of party-list groups) are anything but (marginalized)" is a guess all right, but not educated.

Ahon Pinoy has been in existence for over a year now. It was organized with the specific purpose of giving overseas Filipino workers a voice in Congress. Sadly, up to now, the OFWs—hailed as modern-day heroes for the billions of pesos they plunk yearly into the economy—do not enjoy such representation.

Ahon Pinoy has a four-pronged program for the OFWs. It will work for:

■ Collateral-free loans of up to P1 million for livelihood projects.

■ Guaranteed education for their offspring from the primary grades through college via the study-now, pay-later plan.

■ Assistance for decent housing.

■ Lower cost of telephone calls—primarily the cellular phone, and a longer expiry period for pre-paid cell phone cards. We believe that lower communication costs—to be sought through persuasion, or if need be, through legislation—will somehow ease the pain of separation and mitigate the social costs of estrangement between the OFWs and their offsprings.

So much for the program. The editorial wonders, if our constituency "shouldn't be represented by actual OFWs, or at least by former workers who have since returned home."

We assure the Inquirer that our nominees have experience in labor and in the expatriate workers' field. Modesty aside, no team can be more eminently qualified to represent the OFWs in Congress.

I once served as a contractual employee and as information officer, with the Philippine Consulate General in Toronto, Canada. Bernie Ople was once secretary general of the National Manpower and Youth Council (now Tesda) and currently secretary general of the Asian Regional Training and Development Organization (Artdo). Ernesto Herrera III was an OFW in the United States for two years in the field of IT engineering. Under the mentorship of his father, a former senator and the current secretary general of the Trade Union Council of the Philippines, he has become familiar with the plight of the workers.

The nominees of Ahon Pinoy all come from humble beginnings. They have deep compassion for the underprivileged and marginalized sector which they seek to represent. And we know whereof we speak when we address the needs of our primary constituency.

May we add that we hope we will be judged on the basis of what we can, and intend to do, and not because of our relationship with our fathers, or brothers.

Dante Francis Ang II
Ahon Pinoy Party List

Kill the karaoke singer

The Long View
By MANUEL L. QUEZON III
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

When I was a wee tot, my father resigned in disgust from a private club to which his father had belonged, because, he said angrily, "It's been reduced to something like the goddamned Rotary."

"What do you mean," I asked dear old dad. I didn't know what the Rotary was, but it sounded like an evil, evil thing at the time.

He snorted and finally spat out, "they... they... do community singing! I refuse to belong to a club where the chief activity consists of singing 'The Beer Barrel Polka' in unison!" He cursed some more and stomped out of the room.

He never did tell me what the Rotary was, or why anything remotely resembling that fine association of outstanding, community-minded merchants (as I later on discovered the Rotary to be) should be a cause for horror. But I did get the distinct impression that "community singing" was something for geriatric imbeciles. Now my father was many things, including geriatric, but an imbecile he was not.

I did discover a few years later that "community singing" was an activity not restricted to the "We Remember Pearl Harbor" crowd. In fact, I must confess with a bit of embarrassment, that in my pubescent years, I did my share of community singing.

Before you pelt me with tomatoes, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, allow me to plead extenuating circumstances. One has little else to do in a school bus full of fellow teenagers. But beyond learning "99 bottles of beer on the wall" and every lewd variation possible of "Hey Teacher" by Pink Floyd, I remain firmly of the opinion that community singing is best left to bored, pimply kids, and should never be considered an activity fit for adults. Unless you are a pro: a performer in, say, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Then community singing is really performance and not communal bleating.

It was only in my mid-20s, a decade ago, that I came to discover a phenomenon that began in Japan, the name of which I can only utter with a shudder: karaoke. Our poor planet, already melting at the poles due to the unbridled flatulence of cows, now seems populated by people who find it fun inflicting their singing on others. I thought it was a fad, but it's now a permanent stain on our society. As well as a minor engine in our economy: I'm presuming selling all those Magic Mikes does someone (not just Manny Pacquiao), somewhere, some good.

My friends and I used to go to a little fish grill place in the middle of nowhere, because they served delicious tuna. Across the place was what we continue to quaintly call a beer garden. You know the place: a sort of bar with a thatched roof and tables arranged around a large television. Beneath the television was a stool. Inebriated, potbellied men would teeter on the stool, clutching a microphone for dear life, and proceed to sing.

Have you ever heard "Unchained Melody" belted out, off-key, by a beer-soaked singer? The distress it causes to the listener should be considered a crime against humanity. No wonder some official somewhere tried to ban it.

Karaoke, like all truly diabolical schemes, is an activity that feeds on man's worst characteristics. The lemming-like nature of man, and man's insufferable vanity, and the sort of drinking that leads to fatal accidents are what make karaoke so irresistible. One need only make goo-goo eyes at a screen, on which appear words (and in the early days of this gruesome fad, a helpful little ball: and why a ball? Would it be too obvious to demand an investigation into whether or not the first bouncing karaoke balls were red, like the red circle in the Japanese flag?), and croak along, while a flock of similarly minded boobies nod appreciatively, knowing full well that soon they will be able to inflict their wailings on their fellow "bashie-bazouk" now belting out songs. Madness, I tell you.

Eventually the cacophony emanating from that beer hell led us to discontinuing our eating at the fish grill (that, and a frightening episode concerning the frightening effect of cod and its oil on one's plumbing, but that's another story). We never saw that beer garden again. Karaoke, on the other hand, kept following me everywhere I went.

"Karaoke joints" sprouted everywhere. More often than not, a karaoke bar can be identified by three sinister letters, in lurid, glowing neon colors, on its sign: KTV. Karaoke TV. KTV places usually sport signs in Japanese, too, and are staffed by bar girls in skimpy little dresses, waiting to hop on the laps of first, Japanese, then eventually, Korean tourists, and in more recent years, Filipinos. Karaoke may have begun in Japan, but it took over all of Asia faster than the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy could ever have accomplished. And it conquered the United States.

So from Tokyo to Manila, Shanghai to Saigon, Singapore to San Francisco, after work, supposedly sane people gallop from their places of work into karaoke bars, and proceed to indulge in communal sound pollution. They practically fellate microphones; they damage the eardrums of their peers; they do injustices to songs such that I want to cry out to Heaven for musical vengeance: and they find it fun.

I tell you, the phenomenon frightens me. But were you, for the sake of sanity and art, to regulate, much less ban, karaoke singing, if not in private, then, for the love of God, in public, and that includes all public holidays and places of relaxation, you would have a revolution the likes of which this country has never seen before.

But surely there must be many people out there who now spend their after office hours hiding at home, dreading all social invitations, and declining as many as possible, because of their fear of being dragged into joining the near-Satanic rituals of karaoke. Why debate the existence of hell when it's here, on earth: and its chief demon's name is Magic Mike?

SAMU'T SARI

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

GOOD FRIDAY TRADITION
Members of the United Filipino Organization and MDX Amateur Radio Club pose for a group photo at their tent along a road leading up to Mt. Tapotchao on Good Friday.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Members of the MDX Amateur Radio Club smile for the camera after passing out water and food to people walking up Mt. Tapotchao yesterday morning.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

CNMI Power officers and members pose beside their tent along a road leading up to Mt. Tapotchao on Good Friday.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Reliable members of the Friends of the Mariana Islands and Beautify CNMI!'s Angelo Villagomez pose for a photo during yesterday's Mt. Tapotchao cleanup.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

RED CROSS WALKATHON
Subway employees smile for a group photo during the 21'st Annual Red Cross Walkathon last Saturday in Susupe.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

CNMI Power members pose with NMI Red Cross officers during the 21'st Annual Red Cross Walkathon last Saturday in Susupe.

Maharlika
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